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ABSTRACT

A model of the various tasks of the instructor of illiterate and semiliterate adults is presented and discussed. These tasks include assessing the learner, instructing the learner, selecting methods and materials, and evaluating the effectiveness of instruction. An abbreviated case study is used to illustrate these instructional roles. (AA)

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Reading for Illiterate and Semi-Literate Adults: An Assessment-Prescriptive Instructional Model

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Introduction

Perhaps, before attacking the problem of illiteracy and/or semi-literacy among adults, it may be 1) necessary to consider why adults may be illiterate and 2) if illiteracy prevails among one specific group of individuals. First, illiteracy may be camouflaged by the dependency on actual and pictorial representations of items. In other words, some illiterate adults are able to shop, use the transit system, and discuss current events with little or no error. A reason for this may be that, over a number of years, they have been able to gain basic information without having to decode graphemic symbols. For example: illiterate adults will know that the car advertisement in the magazine is a car because of the picture, not the words; the head of lettuce in the food section of the newspaper is just that, a head of lettuce; a can of orange juice is orange juice (if there is a picture of orange juice on the can); a football is a football and a suit is a suit without being able to decode graphemic symbols. Also, illiterate adults are able to travel from one designated point of origin to another in cities and towns without being able to graphemically decode street, bus and train signs. In addition, the media, pictures in newspapers and magazines, and conversations with various people have facilitated communication for illiterate adults during discussions of current events. Furthermore, aids such as the aforementioned may help illiterate adults to formulate opinions and make important decisions in their lives.

Second, illiteracy does not appear to have selected its victims meticulously. In 1969, for persons 14 years of age and older, it was found that 1.0% of the total population or 1.4 million persons in the United States were illiterate (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1974). Notably, Fitzgerald (1974) observed from the results of special reading tests that were part of HEW's Health Examination Survey that "One million American children aged 12-17 cannot read even at the fourth-grade level." In terms of family income, he noted that

> ...families with less than $3,000 annual income, 9.8 percent of white youths and 22.1 percent of blacks were judged illiterate. But the inability to read dropped to 3.5 percent and 12.6 percent, respectively in the $5,000-$6,999 income level, and to .8 percent and 4.7 percent in families earning more than $10,000.

Not only should those working to prevent illiteracy become concerned about the ethnic breakdown of the above data but may pay credence to the fact that illiteracy is not selective. There are illiterate people in high-income brackets and low-income brackets. And, one may assume that their experiential backgrounds are varied, i.e., some have technical hobbies, some are married, some are single, some perform complex skills on their jobs and some involved themselves in tasks that are significantly cerebral.

The attack on adult illiteracy must be carefully planned and executed. In this paper, the writers are discussing and suggesting an assessment-prescriptive instructional model for careful scrutiny and use by instructors that teach illiterate and semi-literate adults to develop their reading skills. The overall model delienates the role of the instructor. This role encompasses: assessing the learners,

instructing the learners, selecting methods and materials for the learners and evaluating the instructor. Following the discussion of the model is an abbreviated case study of Lilly, a 47 year old adult learner. Lilly's case study is based on the model with a prescription and instructional strategies included.

Role of the Instructor

The instructor's primary function is to assess or diagnose the learner with informal and standardized measures, assess the data obtained from those measures, select materials and appropriate instructional strategies and organize a program of instruction which utilizes that data.

First, assessment is one of the most important elements in the instructional model. An instructor must know the reading strengths and needs of a learner prior to instruction. Specifically, an instructor should assess the learner's reading skills: word recognition, comprehension, vocabulary and rate of reading. In order to properly assess a learner, it will be extremely necessary for the instructor to understand the adult learner's characteristics and to select the proper measures.

An adult learner brings to reading a considerable amount of experience that the younger learner does not. This suggests much less time and effort need be given to establishing the necessary background for understanding what is read. Also, the adult learner is likely to be able to relate his developing reading skill to useful endeavors. For example, an adult learner is likely to want to use and practice his newly gained skill in reading the newspapers, or a current talked-about

best seller while the younger learner often seeks to avoid reading. These characteristics: experience and the ability to use reading are strengths and can contribute to reading improvement. Often a conflicting characteristic accompanies the strengths, that is, the learner that is ashamed of his lack of reading skill will attempt to hide it. At any rate, these three characteristics must be considered during assessment.

Proper measures for assessment include informal and standardized. Scales and Biggs (1976) offered the following instructor devised informal measure for analyzing word recognition difficulties as an example for instructors to follow in formulating their informal measures.

SAMPLE
INFORMAL MEASURE
(Word Recognition)

DIRECTIONS: Whenever possible, divide the following nonsense words into syllables, mark the short vowels, mark the long vowels, and circle the prefixes and the suffixes.

premudcretion	rethruble
exuot	baephmioleck
waxwhemp	wi
juwag	phaekle
quist	chalwuclung
yeelnartion	naustillow

This informal measure may be administered in a number of ways. One way of course, is to follow the stated directions. Another way is for the instructor to have a continuing conversation with the learner

about each nonsense word. For example, "does 'premudcretion' begin like anything that you have heard before? Say 'pre,' say'mud,' now say the first sound in 'mud,'" and so forth. This type of measure will enable the instructor and learner to gather data about the learner's auditory skill - a skill which must be advanced for understanding word recognition skills. Informal measures are many and may be varied, however, the writers are suggesting a development of similar measures by instructors for such skills as: vocabulary in isolation, words in context and vocabulary as word parts to assess basic reading skills.

Even though standardized measures can be negatively critized and, rightly so, they do possess merit in the assessment area. A caution is not to overgeneralize the results of standardized measures. Chall (1958) observed that "...standardized reading tests...frequently give a distorted picture of reading achievement, particularly at the extremes among the poorest and best readers..." However, they should be considerd and used to the advantage of learners. Bond and Tinker (1973) indicated that standardized group tests which are analytical in type provide useful information concerning strengths and weaknesses of individual pupils.

When using this assessment-prescriptive instructional model, instructors are advised to select diagnostic, as well as, survey standardized measures. The diagnostic measures will help to assess the basic reading skills while the survey measures will help to assess in the comprehension, vocabulary and rate areas. Instructors may find such measures as the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Tests, Iowa Silent Reading Tests, Davis Read-Tests and California Phonics Survey helpful during the assessment process. Again, adult learners' characteristics and basic reading skills

must be considered and assessed prior to instruction.

Second, instruction follows assessment because instructors must know what the strengths and needs of learners are prior to instruction. Once data has been obtained and interpreted from assessment measures, instructors will then, be able to organize and implement programs of instruction for learners. For example, if it is found that a particular learner reads slowly (under 70 WPM), only recognizes a few graphemes or words, and/or uses context clues poorly, the instructor will have obtained data for the initial part of an instructional program. Armed with this data of the learner's reading skills and possibly a survey of the types of materials that are useful and interesting to the learner, the instructor can, then, begin planning an instructional program for that learner. This program should encompass specific practice exercises that will encourage, as well as, develop the needed reading skills.

Third, methods and materials are as crucial to this model as assessment and instruction. In selecting specific methods and materials for adult learners, the instructor must be aware of the basic characteristics of adult learners (mentioned earlier in this paper) which differ significantly from younger learners. O'Donnell (1973) cites the highly developed perceptual system which the adult learner possesses. This system apparently enables adults to learn quickly, but not, he warns without a great deal of practice set in varied contexts. O'Donnell further suggested that many adults described as illiterate, "have mastered basic phonic and structural analysis variants and can read materials at their operational levels at speeds varying between sixty and seventy words per minute". This would appear to suggest instruction based on a level of instruction

suitable to adults only. If indeed, the experience is evident, methods and materials should be taken from an adult setting.

Productive learning experiences for adults are generally those that meet a felt need. With the adult learners' needs in mind, selection of materials for developing reading facility poses few problems. Most adults will want to keep abreast of local news, especially that which effects their lives, such as the running debate over school taxes. Often older adults wish to improve reading skills so that they may read the Bible or other religious literature. The young adult may be concerned with technical manuals associated with a vocational area or hobby. Automobile mechanics or sewing manuals provide examples. Materials that provide not only practice in reading skills but information that has application for learners personal needs can range from cookbooks to driver's manuals, from tax forms to classified newspaper ads and from legal documents to applications. In addition, selected sections from a variety of workbooks designed for the less experienced younger learners needing skill practice but not juvenile pictures and vocabulary may be used. Material selection is important and should be conducted within the interest areas of learners.

Finally, the effectiveness of the instructor's role during instruction must be evaluated. This role can be evaluated by simply keeping abreast of the instructor's responsibilities. Some of the responsibilities include such things as knowing where to obtain suitable instructional and testing materials, knowing when to change the learners' prescriptions, knowing when to have conferences with learners and knowing how to keep records of learners' involvement and development in reading.

For, without this evaluation, the effectiveness of the instructor may not be developed as fully as necessary for learners. Further, a lack of needed adjustments in instruction could result in learners not being challenged in their instructional programs.

An Abbreviated Case Study

Following is an example of the model operationalized. Key elements of the model include the conference, which was designed to elicit the learner's view of her reading behavior and reading history; the informal assessment, which focused on the instructor's role as a knowledgeable and sensitive interpreter of data; the formal assessment, which served as data against which to compare and contrast the informal data, gather new data and discover significant patterns of reading strengths and needs; the prescription, which outlined instructor-learner interaction (strategies) and materials.

The Conference

Lilly provided information about her personal reading history and habits by filling out, as much as she could, on a form designed to elicit such information. Using this information and the form as a basis for discussion, the following personal data was gathered. Lilly described herself as a forty-seven year old widow who had attended school through the seventh grade. She left school at the beginning of her eighth school year, to take a job as a domestic to help with expenses at home. Her grades had been D's and C's in reading and in subjects requiring much independent reading. Lilly had done as little reading as possible in school and rarely ever read outside of school. She had had difficulty

decoding words and tended to forget the content of what she was reading before she could complete a selection. As she grew older, she "read" the newspaper and magazines but relied on the pictures or other graphic clues for meaning. She kept up with current news stories through radio and television. Further, she would remember names from newscasts and made many attempts to locate those names in the Sunday newspaper.

Currently, she reported no physical problems. However, she does wear glasses to correct farsightedness. The reason Lilly gave for seeking help in reading improvement was to give her a better chance at getting a teacher's aide job in the school attended by her granddaughter.

Informal Assessment

A content area informal reading inventory developed by Chapman et. al. (1974) was administered to get a rough estimate of grade level performance. Lilly then read excerpts from the newspaper, i.e., the comic section, editorials, women's pages; and magazines orally and silently. Next, Lilly and the instructor discussed the contents of those writings in order to determine the extent to which she had comprehended what she had read. Questions for these discussions were devised at the literal, interpretive and critical levels. These levels were used as guides to determine specifically the complexity of questions Lilly could answer. In addition, similar materials were presented as cloze passages in both written and oral form. Lilly's responses to the oral cloze passages were significantly higher than the written passage. Finally, an instrument similar to the sample word recognition measure presented earlier in this paper was used to assess Lilly's word recognition skills.

Her responses to the Chapman et. al. (1974) Inventory indicated that she functioned at third grade instructional level in word recognition and fifth grade instructional level in comprehension. When offered the opportunity to select articles and excerpts from newspapers and magazines, she chose those with illustrations that provided much of the information through non-graphemic/morphemic means. She read these articles with reasonable accuracy. Next, the instructor selected articles on approximately the same reading level without illustrations for Lilly to read. Her reading of these articles indicated that words of high frequency were easily recognized and unknown words were generally omitted. When asked to, "try to figure out the word 'creative'," she produced the initial sound, and mumbled softly "it has 'eat' in it." Again, she attempted to produce a meaningful word but could not, so she omitted the word and kept reading. As the context clues in the reading materials became fewer, Lilly's reading became less accurate and she became increasingly less able to answer the comprehension questions.

On the basis of informal assessment, Lilly appeared to experience such word recognition difficulties as failure to use phonic analysis beyond attempting to produce initial consonants and vowel sounds and faulty use of word elements as an aid to analyzing meaningful word parts. Comprehension difficulties seemed to have grown out of those instances where failure to recognize certain key words interrupted the reading and diverted her attention from meaning.

Formal Assessment

In order to get a general idea of Lilly's ability to handle formal reading materials, the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test Level II (SDRT)

was administered. The subtests of the SDRT are: Reading Comprehension at the Literal and Inferential levels, Vocabulary, Syllabication, Sound Discrimination, Blending and Rate of Reading. Data from the SDRT was interpreted and a cross check was made with the informal data. The scores which Lilly earned on the SDRT tended to support the data from the informal measures.

In addition, a section of the advanced level of the Durrell Listening - Reading Series was administered in order to get a rough estimate of Lilly's reading potential. The combined listening vocabulary and paragraph scores averaged early eighth grade level. This estimated listening level together with her responses to the oral cloze passages indicated a strength in listening comprehension. Lilly's advance listening level is classic, for this is often found among illiterate and semi-literate adults.

Information gathered from these standardized instruments seemed to support the data gathered by informal means.

Strengths and Needs

The data generated through the conference, as well as from responses to both informal and formal means seemed to indicate the following pattern of strengths and needs. Her strengths appeared to be:

1. Comprehension of written materials using illustrations as well as verbal contextual clues,
2. Listening for and retaining practical information,
3. Comprehending what is read in a critical and practical way, i.e., able to consistently come to logical conclusions when sufficient information is provided,

4. A relatively large and increasing sight vocabulary of high frequency currently used words.

Lilly demonstrated a need to develop:

1. Word recognition skills, both phonic and structural analysis, i.e., associating clusters of letters with specific sounds rather than single letters with single sounds and identifying meaningful word parts,
2. A variety of strategies for recognizing words and a systematic plan for using them, e.g., "when context clues fail, try...",
3. The habit of reading print with less reliance on illustrations for clues,
4. The habit of reading for pleasure, as well as for information.

The Prescription

Lilly's wish to become a teacher's aide served as multipurpose incentive for improvement. For example, as she came to see the benefits of reading practice, at her initiative, she set her own goal of gradually increasing the time she spent doing independent reading. Her vocational interest further provided the major portion of the content of the instructional materials used. Children's stories were read in preparation for story-telling sessions with young children. Tutor manuals were read for reading practice as well as for sources of information about the anticipated job activities.

In addition to selected skillbuilding workbooks, materials used included newspaper and magazine articles adapted as cloze exercises designed to encourage context clue use. As skill in these exercises increased her reliance on non-word clues was diminished. By working with material con-

taining more and more word clues and fewer non word clues, she gradually shifted her comprehension strategies and began to read the written message.

Lilly also shifted and modified her strategies for word recognition. She was carefully guided to use only those rules and generalizations that would be most productive, given her current decoding habits. Recognizing hard and soft c and g; being aware of vowel-consonant patterns such as VCCV, VC and C+le; translating commonly occurring grapheme clusters into sounds as in "ough", "ight", "ph", and "qu"; represented her specific skill needs in this area. Additionally, her habit of finding "little words in big words" and using it nearly exclusively as a strategy to decode words, began to fade as she became acquainted with a variety of structural analysis elements including common affixes and root elements such as "anti", "ology", and "port". Once mastery of the analysis skills was underway, the following systematic approach to identifying unknown words adapted from Thomas and Robinson (1972, p. 43) was suggested:

1. Seek meaning in the context first.
2. If unproductive, examine word for meaningful elements or parts.
3. If none can be identified, sound out word using phonic rules (sounds represented by letter clusters included) to determine if the sound approximation triggers the memory of a word heard before.
4. If all else fails, consult the various definitions in the dictionary and match that meaning as closely as possible with the context in which the word occurs.

The prescription described here represents the early response to the assessment data generated about Lilly. The prescription is always tentative and subject to modification based on the learner's response to instruction. On-going assessment growing out of Lilly's changing strengths and needs became the basis for later instruction.

Conclusion

The writers have presented an assessment-prescriptive instructional model suitable for instructing illiterate and semi-literate adults in reading. Noteably the elements of reading discussed here include such skills as: being able to recognize graphemes, morephemes and phonemes, being able to decode words, being knowledgeable about syntax and being able to respond or react to certain word variants. In addition to the reading elements, adult characterstics were emphasized as having special significance for designing instructional programs in reading.

This model has been used by the writers with positive and rewarding results for adult learners as well as instructors. It is hoped that the model may be modified if necessary and used by others seeking to solve simlar literacy problems.

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